Customizing Myth: The Personal in the Public

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> The psychology of artistic production and consumption involves identification processes at every turn.
>
> —Kenneth Burke (1973:227)

On the surface of the matter, it would seem that mythic discourse is a quintessential form of what Basil Bernstein terms "public language," that is, "a language which continuously signals the normative arrangements of the group rather than individuates experiences of its members" (1960:181). This assumption is amply reinforced by the important community work attributed to myth in the many definitions and roles devised for it by scholars over the centuries. Any folklorist could assemble a list of impressive public or communal duties assigned to myth in the last century or two, a list that might include (among other entries) Max Müller's ideas about "mythopoeic thought," G. L. Gomme's tidy characterization of myth as "the science of a pre-scientific age," Bronislaw Malinowski's thesis that myth establishes a charter for social institutions, and Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion that "myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (1969:12). Whatever formulation is chosen, we find ourselves in a discourse that would seem to largely exclude the personal in favor of the impersonal, the communal, and the collective. Practical facts conducive to personalization of the narrative, such as the age of the storyteller, the composition of the audience, the occasion for the storytelling event, are a matter of indifference in these frames of reference.

This trope of impersonality clashes with what we know from innumerable ethnographies of speaking, that circumstantial factors condition every performance of traditional material. We have on our hands a collision between conflicting paradigms, one that argues for the impermeable character

of mythic discourse—as a public language, charged with weighty social functions, it cannot succumb to the merely fortuitous—the other arguing for the impact of situation on all performances, including those that feature mythic narrative. How are we to resolve this impasse? We can take note, at the outset, that the first of these paradigms operates at a level of considerable abstraction whereas the second paradigm is lodged in specific community events and actions. This distinction between angles of vision helps account for difference in conception, but it does not resolve questions about the fundamental character of myth. We are still obliged to ask, is myth, after all, a public language impervious to the incidental and the personal, or is it a permeable discourse open to personal influences?

To be sure, ethnographers of mythic narrative discourse as it occurs in its human settings have anticipated the response I will propose to this question. A classic case is the argument Dell Hymes made about the poignancy of the shining, destructive object in "The Sun's Myth," that this tale, for Charles Cultee, might well have been about "assimilating the disaster to his people through the genre of myth" (1975:360). Later, Ellen Basso (1990:8) formulated the consensus that mythic narratives derive from and exemplify "interactive, transactive processes" with a "metanarrational" character in that they are "formed from interpersonal processes that emerge from oral performance: shared imaginative intimacy or dialogicality."

What I propose to do here is extend this line of thought by isolating a set of individualizing maneuvers carried out by storytellers I came to know well as I experienced and documented the mythic narrative traditions of Andean peoples in Colombia and Ecuador. It has been my privilege to witness among the native peoples of Colombia's Sibundoy Valley, and among Quichua Runa in the vicinity of Otavalo, Ecuador, the workings of a living New World mythology. In the course of recording these mythologies, I found ample confirmation of the public-discourse paradigm, when my indigenous friends pointed to the myth plots as fundamental to understanding their collective identity. In the Sibundoy Valley, the myths stand as an account of the arrival of civilization; stories told in its two indigenous communities, the Kamsá and Inga, about the first people are foundational to the local ethos. In the Otavalo vicinity, mythic narratives about mountain and lake deities locate the Quichua in their corner of the cosmos. In both settings, mythic narratives rehearse a model of the civilizing process that sustains contemporary social relations and defines contemporary relationships with the spirit world. These are hardly tales to trifle with, given their association with the well-springs of these Andean communities. Those who perform such stories engage in a

particular species of cultural transmission, that of conveying eternal verities from one moment, and one person, to another. Normally, they are elders or established members of the community, and by invoking the deeds of the ancestors, they cloak their own words in the trappings of authority.

Given this tendency in mythic narrative towards fixed and stable narrative armatures, the trick for our present purposes is to identify the spaces within this public discourse that are open to the incidental, the accidental, the personal. I explore here, in a preliminary fashion, the scope for customizing, for personalized shaping, of the shared mythic material. I view the mythic discourse of Andean communities in Colombia and Ecuador as a trove of communal narrative that is filtered through the minds and repertoires of individuals and that is, to a surprising degree—but of course, subject to limits—adapted to the orientations and concerns of the people who work these resources into actual narrative performances. In order to accomplish my purpose, I must introduce a handful of friends and associates who have regaled me over the years with their tales of mythic ancestors and other spirits: Mariano Chicunque (now deceased), María Juajibioy, and Francisco Tandioy of Colombia's Sibundoy Valley, and Luis Alberto Yamberla and Maruja Picuasi of Imbabura province in Ecuador.

Inspection of key mythic narratives I recorded from each of these individuals demonstrates that the mythology of a community, though remarkably persistent in its plot structures, is in many ways a very personal affair. I can detect in these tales a variety of methods for personalizing the public discourse of myth, each based on a process of identification linking the storyteller to a specific story protagonist. I want to distinguish kinds and levels of identification at work in this customizing process. One is *vicarious*, wherein the storyteller identifies with but remains distinct from the tale protagonist. These stories are set in third-person discourse and they preserve the distance between narrative frame and narrated event. Here I will draw on three Sibundoy examples: Mariano Chicunque and María Juajibioy tell stories that feature the wisdom and prowess of story protagonists who share their (the narrators') social positions; Francisco Tandioy also identifies with a story protagonist, and in his *"Shulupsimanda Parlo"* ("Story of the *Shulupsi* Bird"), this vicarious identification impels him to foreground the plight of the young man whose mother interferes with his courtship plans.

Myths are customized, I will argue, through a second type of identification, what I will call *virtual* identification, when the attraction between storyteller and story protagonist becomes so strong that the storytellers insert themselves into narratives imbued with a mythic consciousness. These tales

Mariano Chicunque, Kamsá storyteller, and Justo Jacanamijoy

Maria Juajibioy with her mother, Concepción

abandon the distancing of third-person discourse to settle in the immediacy of first-person narrative. If they necessarily separate themselves from ancestral times, they acquire in compensation the thrill of lived experience. To illustrate virtual identification I will sample gripping memorates performed for my benefit by two Quichua Runa friends from the area around Otavalo in the north of Ecuador. Maruja Picuasi and Luis Alberto Yamberla place themselves at the center of dramatic narratives evoking mythical scenarios. I should note that my choices of illustration here should not be read as stipulating tendencies inherent in Sibundoy as opposed to Quichua Runa mythologies. Both kinds of identification occur equally in both places.

Indeed, a subsidiary feature of my argument here is to assemble the genres of mythic narrative and myth-inspired tales of spiritual encounter into a larger category of narrative marked by mythic consciousness, which I define as an ability or tendency to perceive and articulate a spiritual substratum to everyday experience, often guided by a set of traditional mythic plots but fluid and adaptable to the vagaries of the mundane. Granted, mythic narrative and memorate can be juxtaposed to one another on formal and functional grounds, but my work in these Andean communities has convinced me that these narrative genres tap into a common fund of imaginative potential. For the Kamsá mythic narratives to be examined in what follows, what is of interest is the way personal orientations figure in the choices made by storytellers as to what they will narrate and how they will position specific actors in the stories. With regard to the Runa memorates, the intrusion of the personal is to be expected; what is of interest there is the way accounts of personal experiences are shaped by the communal contours of Runa mythic narrative. The clearest marker of this continuity in Runa mythic consciousness is the presence of Taita Imbabura, the spirit of the volcano, in both myth and memorate—in the former, he is a prime actor in Runa cosmogony, while in the latter, he is the principal source of spiritual strength when people are afflicted with spirit sickness through encounters with malevolent supernatural agents.

In every case the narrated events remain faithful to communal prototypes, yet the storyteller manages to cast the story in such a way as to highlight a personal connection, either indirectly, through vicarious identification, or more directly, through virtual identification. Clearly, these processes of identification animate these performances and give them much of their power, both for the storytellers and their audiences. I'd go so far as to say that this vested performance confers the spice and piquancy that is too often missing in scholarly treatments of myth's public persona.

Vicarious Identification among the Sibundoy

As I came into contact with Sibundoy narratives and narrators, I noticed a tendency for people to tell stories featuring a protagonist with whom they shared at least one important characteristic, especially age-rank or gender. A good illustration of this principle is the storytelling of Mariano Chicunque, the most prolific of my Kamsá consultants. Over a period of three months in 1978, I recorded quite a few mythic narratives from this amiable and knowledgeable elder. Typically, his stories featured the exploits of knowledgeable old men, whose application of wisdom to complicated situations generally moved things to a successful conclusion. It dawned on me that Mariano was, to a degree, telling stories about himself, or at least, about people in his social category—older men with a thorough mastery of local tradition. In one of these tales, *"Shatxetemunga,"* "The Red Dwarfs," an elder is brought in to figure out how to rid the population of small, reddish creatures who were harming the people around them with something like "electricity." The elder knows to use a certain wood for purposes of smoking the red dwarfs out of their caves. In the story's aftermath, Mariano reflects back on its meaning, and he exclaims, in Kamsá, *achka kulta bngabe tangwanga!* "So wise were our elders!," a salute he might well be making to himself.

Let's follow this process of identification into another realm of Kamsá mythic narrative. I argue elsewhere that the theme of paradise forestalled is perhaps the central thread of Sibundoy mythic narratives (McDowell 2007). A cluster of tales much savored by Kamsá and Inga audiences features an animal suitor, either male or female, seeking access to a human family. These suitors appear to be human in some ways but they maintain aspects of their animal identities—the owl-man, for example, pecks about for snails and is always scratching his hair. The suitor typically secures the loyalty of an intended spouse and enjoys a period of trial marriage, but in the end cautious members of the intended spouse's family take note of peculiarities and send the suitor away. The cosmological significance of these episodes becomes clear when we learn that the animal suitor possessed fabulous powers that might have mitigated the hardship of human life—the *shulupsi* bird-woman, for example, could brew a whole barrel of maize beer from just three kernels, while the owl-man could clear a thicket and plant and harvest crops just through a series of shouts. The elders lament these losses but I would surmise, taking in the whole sweep of these animal-suitor tales, that such gifts had to be rejected in order to secure a safe zone where human civilization could flourish without the destabilizing effects of rampant spiritual potency.

Now let's consider how two storytellers find ways to personalize tellings within this mythic narrative cluster. María Juajibioy was my hostess and surrogate mother—she called me her *wakiña mayor,* oldest child, during the year that I lived with her, her husband Justo Jacanamijoy, and their four boys still at home at that time, Juan, Angel, Lucho, and Gabe. The daughter of a distinguished community leader, Bautista Juajibioy, who had been *gobernador* of the Kamsá community six times, María was in many ways an exemplary Kamsá woman and mother. She was a skilled weaver, an excellent cook, and she possessed a good hand for planting corn. In short, she had all the female virtues and none of the vices—when people invited her to drink maize beer during the many festivities at her home, she would demur, saying, "Who will look after the children?"

Among her many talents, María was in those days a fine performer of mythic narratives. The story I focus on here, *"Tobiaxbe Parlo,"* "The Young Woman's Tale," belongs to the cluster of stories focused on animal suitors. This tale was told in Kamsá: I present here my transcription of the Kamsá and my translation of that text into English.

I

Kanye tobiaxe inashjango bobonsbiamaka.
A young woman arrived at the home of a young man.

I ch wamben mama jaboknán ibojauyan.
And that intended mother-in-law said to her:

"Xkatjesaboye jenaxaka."
"Come plant *barbacuano* seed."

I ch bebinkwa jabokná ibnetsjwañe:
And that intended daughter-in-law answered her:

"Xwatsetsejaja jomuxenaka."
"I myself will become *barbacuano."*

Asna: "Bibiaxá xmetsabojeka."
Then: "Plant some *achira* for me."

Inye chká jatjwañana: "Xwatsetsejaja bibiná."
Again she responded like that: "I myself will become *achira."*

I nye ndoñese juwenan ntxam tbojtserwanka?
And she just wouldn't listen, how could she beg her?

II

Chorna ch wamben mama jabokná inetsoñe jawashuntsam.
Then that intended mother-in-law went out to plant corn.

Inetsashuntsañokna santopeso ibninyenaka.
Where she was planting corn she found a centipede.

I as cha chuwashuntsantxeka ibnetsutsjanganja.
And then as she was planting corn, she struck it with her digging stick.

Nye natjumbañe inetsashuntsañe.
She just calmly continued planting corn.

Yojabuchoká orna yojtá tsoy.
When she finished she returned to the house.

Chorna ibninyen ch bebinkwa jabokná impasajem.
Then she found that intended daughter-in-law in bad shape.

Intsatotebemañe betxaxena txa lisianajem,
She was sitting there with her head all banged up,

umochkwanajem ibojinyem.
she found her with her head covered.

III

Chorna ch wamben mama jabokná ibojatjay:
Then that intended mother-in-law inquired:

"Ndayek sobrená chká biyatsmanaka?"
"Why, Niece, are you like this?"

Chorna ibojojwá: "Ndoñe kach batá chká xkondwabonaka?"
Then she answered: "Didn't you, Aunt, do this to me?"

Chorna ibojauyán: "Ndayentxe chká tkunbjamaka?"
Then she said to her: "Where did this happen to you?"

Chorna ibnojwá: "Ndoñe ch jajoka jenantxeka xkonjutsjanjanaka?"
Then she responded: "In the garden, didn't you strike me with the digging stick?"

Chorna ibnojwá: "Jenantxeka ndayá santo pesontxe chká tijutsjanganja.
Then she responded: "I struck a large centipede like that with my digging stick.

As ak ndoñe krischian nkondimunaka," ibnauyanaka.
Then you are not a human being," she said to her.

IV

Nye nyetxá sindutatxumbo.
That's all there is just as I know it.

This tale conforms to the paradise forestalled paradigm—the centipede-woman had the power to create food from her own body, but she had to be rejected from the human family to avoid the complications of unchecked spiritual potency. What I wish to highlight here are the continuities between the heroine in the story, the older woman who unmasks the animal suitor, and the performer of this tale, María Juajibioy. Both are mature women who know how to provide food for their families. Both are handy with the digging stick, the instrument used by women for opening the earth to insert seeds. María, in almost all ways a modest person, would brag to me that she had a good hand for planting. In the Sibundoy Valley, women are the planters of seed, and they have their hands cured by the native doctors to insure a good hand for planting. This curing entails hosting a ceremony featuring the ingestion of *ayahuasca,* the medicine vine (McDowell 1998). The result of such curing is a hand that is spiritually protected, which means that the seeds it handles will not be bothered by birds and insects and will instead grow to yield a substantial crop.

María's *"Tobiaxbe Parlo"* is a story of cultural preservation wherein an exemplary protagonist plays a key role in deterring the intended transgression of an animal suitor. María, an exemplary Kamsá woman in her own right, performs a tale of a mythical ancestor who resembles her in every way. In the maintenance of this story in María's repertoire, in her readiness to perform it, and in the slanting of the narrative to feature the heroic actions of its female protagonist, we see the workings of a process of identification linking narrator to story protagonist. Whether consciously or otherwise, María had good reason to tell this tale and tell it in this fashion: she is telling a story about herself.

Francisco Tandioy is a remarkable ambassador for the Inga community, carrying Inga language and culture first to the provincial capital city of Pasto, where for many years he taught Inga at the Universidad de Nariño, and later to the distant Midwest of the United States, where he currently teaches his language and culture to students and faculty at Indiana University. Turning now to his telling of *"Shulupsimanda Parlo,"* "The Tale of the *Shulupsi* Bird," we will see with greater clarity how this process of

Francisco Tandioy, Inga ambassador, with his mother, Margarita

María Juajibioy
working with a digging stick

identification can shape not only repertoire choice but also the weighing of different story components. *"Shulupsimanda Parlo"* is another member of the paradise forestalled cluster. It concerns a young woman who comes to the home of an eligible bachelor and is asked by the young man's mother to prepare maize beer for thirsty field workers. When the older woman returns from the fields, she finds the young woman combing her hair and the raw material for the beer, three barrels of corn cobs, still apparently just as she had left them. This woman becomes angry, and without looking to see if the beer had been made, she scolds the younger woman severely. As it happens, the maize beer had been made—the young woman possessed the uncanny ability to make a barrel of maize beer from just a few grains of corn. But the younger woman is so incensed at her treatment that she turns into a *shulupsi* bird, dips into the maize beer, and flies away. As with the centipede woman, the marriage deal is off; the boundaries of the human community are protected, but at the cost of rejecting a gift of knowledge that could have greatly reduced the human work load.

The core theme of paradise forestalled is made explicit in Francisco's performance. The *shulupsi* bird utters, in Inga, some parting words:

> *Kawachispaka, nirkasi: "Kunauramandaka, kimsa saparuwaka suglla mangallami aswankangichi."*
> Showing her the maize beer, she said: "From now on, with three baskets you will make only one barrel of maize beer."

Francisco's version of this story is unique among a dozen or so tellings in my possession for the epilogue he inserts, a dialogue between the mother and son. Here is the relevant text, in Inga and my English translation.

> *"Mana mamata nirkaiki, ama iapa mandapuakungi?*
> "Didn't I tell you, Mother, not to be ordering her about so much?
>
> *Ianga kawapuangi, kam mama mana uiangichu.*
> You see it's in vain, you, Mother, don't listen.
>
> *Kam tukui nukapa warmikunatami, chasa mitikuchipuangi, di rabumanda.*
> You make all my women leave like this from anger.
>
> *Chimandami ñujpa kawanga tiá, nispami piñanga tiá.*
> Because of that next time one must look, then one must scold.
>
> *Mama mana chasa piñapuangima, chi warmita, ñami nuka kasarani.*
> Mother, if you hadn't scolded that woman so, I would already have married.

I tukui warmikuna ñami, kimsa muru sarallawa, ñami aswankuna, sug manga junda.
And all women would already use only three kernels of corn to make a full barrel of maize beer.

Tukui warmikuna, manami iskunakurshangichi, kaituku achka sara, sug manga aswangapaglla."
All women would not have to shuck so much corn to make only one barrel of maize beer."

This epilogue underscores the high price paid when the *shulupsi* woman takes her leave. In addition, it features an extended rant by the young man, who accuses his mother of consistently ruining his romances by making heavy demands on the young women he brings around. It is this last detail, the son's recrimination, that is distinctive in Francisco's shaping of the story. Francisco, a young man himself at the time of this telling, gives vent to a feeling of outrage that works perfectly well within the confines of the story but seems, in its extension and vehemence, to transcend it to some degree. One suspects that Francisco is giving voice to an endemic complaint males among the younger generation launch against their seniors, that their mothers place obstacles in the way of their securing mates. And indeed, in anecdote and conversation, the exploitation of daughters-in-law does surface in the Sibundoy Valley (as elsewhere) as a major point of social tension.

What we see here is that even fixed story plots offer multiple interpretive options for storytellers. *"Shulupsimanda Parlo,"* for example, features three main protagonists: the young woman, the mother, and the young man. The storyteller can locate the narrative in the experience of any one of these; Francisco's version, as we have seen, places the experience of the young man in the foreground, at least in its concluding passages. This selection of focal point is another facet of the identification process linking narrators to story protagonists. As does María, Francisco chooses the character that most closely resembles him—in this case, the young man—as his narrative focal point. And by inserting the epilogue, Francisco opens an ample space for personalizing the story, for making it pertinent to his own concerns. Indeed, he stretches the story nearly to a breaking point, since had the son prevailed and the mother not intervened, the young woman would have successfully entered the family, thus violating the proscription entailed in the paradise forestalled paradigm (see McDowell 1994, 2007).

What we have in these three Sibundoy cases—Mariano Chicunque's, María Juajibioy's, and Francisco Tandioy's—is a sympathetic vibration that

draws the storyteller to the story on the basis of vicarious identification. In each case the storyteller shares salient social characteristics with a main protagonist in the tale. For Mariano and María, the plot elements cast a favorable light back on the storyteller—the elders are wise, as is Mariano, and María has the good hand for planting and strives to assure the well-being of family, just as the mother does in *"Tobiaxbe Parlo."* Francisco's tale takes us a bit further in the direction of customizing myth—his vicarious identification with one of the three main protagonists in his tale causes him to spin out a facet of the story that remains minimal in other tellings.

It seems to me that the most important dimension of this identification dynamic we witness in these performances is the prior impact of the story on the storytellers themselves. It is reasonable to suppose that each of these storytellers finds the story inhabitable; the commonalities of social identity in each case create a comfortable match between storyteller and tale. These storytellers can try on these stories and sense their power and veracity; they can readily picture themselves in the starring roles. And this prior act of self-persuasion leads to a subsequent act of public persuasion when the stories are related to an audience, all the more convincingly because the performers can inhabit their tales.

Virtual Identification among the Quichua Runa

Is it fair to say that the memorate, the first-person narrative of spiritual encounter, is a customizing of myth? Perhaps not in all cases, but when the memorate coexists in a tale community with a living mythology, then I think the case can be made. Certainly, such tales evince, at the least, an intimate engagement with mythic thought. Quichua Runa are accustomed to hear and tell stories about spiritual actors who roamed their territory in ancestral times, setting the parameters of lived experience in our days. For example, *wando rumi,* a large stone lying part-way up the slopes of Taita Imbabura, Father Imbabura, the volcanic peak that rises above Ilumán and Peguche and Otavalo itself, is said to have arrived at that spot when Mama Cotacachi, a mountain that rises across the valley, threw it at her former lover, Taita Imbabura—she sought to strike his head with it, but her shot fell short of that mark. Another set of tales stresses the presence of spiritual actors in more recent times. A traditional Runa tale featuring Our Lord, for example, concerns an elderly, beggarly man who arrives at a sumptuous hacienda and asks for a piece of bread. Not only is he rejected, but the owner turns loose his attack dogs on the humble visitor. The first sign that

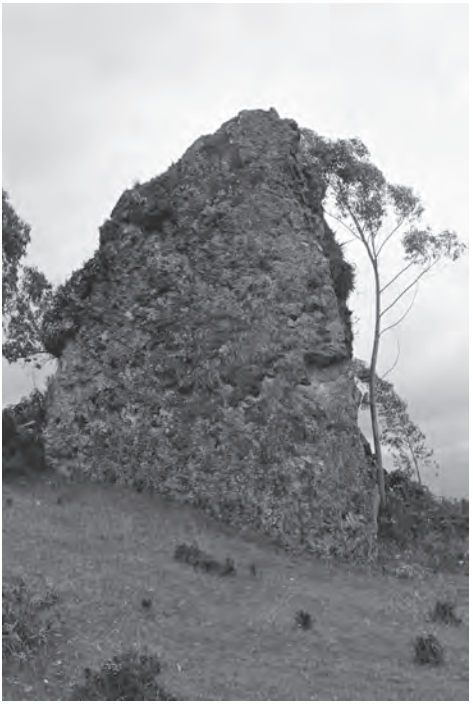
something unusual is afoot comes when these vicious dogs catch up to the elderly man and start licking his hand. That night, rains come and persist until the hacienda and its owner are engulfed in the rising waters.

In this context of mythic consciousness, it is not difficult for contemporary Runa to push identification to its limits by locating themselves as protagonists in mythic encounters that resemble the tales they have heard over the years from their elders. I heard two such tales from my compadres in Ilumán, Luis Alberto Yamberla and Maruja Picuasi, when a session devoted to reciting superstitious beliefs evolved into a performance of memorates confirming the spiritual substrate implied in the belief statements. First, Luis Alberto told us the story of his encounter with a *sombra,* a spirit that interposes itself in human affairs to derail human endeavors. Luis Alberto was able to extract himself from the clutches of the *sombra* when he recalled the Runa belief that *sombras* must be struck only with the left fist. Following this account, his wife Maruja related a layered narrative with multiple episodes, the gist being that through her capacity to work with spiritual remedies, she was able to extract her neighbor, and then herself, from the grip of a life-threatening spiritual attack.

Granted, neither of these Runa narratives follows precisely a pre-existing script familiar from the collective mythology of the community. But this capacity to project oneself into a mythical framework insures that the mythic consciousness pervading the tales of the ancestors will not atrophy or become vestigial since it is re-enacted in the experience of today's living people. Here the process of identification, the ability of the storyteller to connect with the tale protagonist, reaches an apotheosis—the storyteller becomes a protagonist in a tale resembling the tales of old, and third-person discourse yields to the first-person mode of personal experience. But this process of virtual identification shares an important feature with the vicarious identification we observed in the Sibundoy texts—here, too, the storyteller assumes the role of cultural conservator, fending off against impertinent incursions from the spirit realm. Like María Juajibioy and Mariano Chicunque, Luis Alberto and Maruja shine forth in their stories as exemplary tokens of their community. The difference is that in the vicarious mode of identification, the light that shines is an indirect one, dependent upon the listener making the connection between tale teller and tale protagonist; in virtual identification, the illumination is direct as tale teller comes to equal tale protagonist.

Let's contemplate a key episode from each of the sample Runa texts. Luis Alberto is an entrepreneur of Runa culture, an emissary of its music and handicrafts, who has established a foothold in Madison, Wisconsin,

Luis Alberto Yamberla, Quichua Runa leader, with his wife, Maruja Picuasi
Photograph by Patricia Glushko



Wando Rumi
Photograph by Patricia Glushko

from where he wanders the Midwest attending fairs and visiting universities. He is a founding member of the Centro Cultural Inti Raymi, composed of several families interrelated through marriage, and a mainstay in the very successful musical troupe Inti Raymi, which has performed at, among other venues, the Lotus Festival in Bloomington, Indiana. Intelligent and forthright, Luis Alberto has been able to navigate in North American culture and he has had a positive impact on his community. Recently, the home that he and Maruja have created has become a destination for groups of university students doing tours of indigenous Ecuador.

Luis Alberto's tale of fighting off the *sombra* or shade that came upon him in a creek bed is a gripping tale of bravery and good thinking under the most difficult of circumstances. Attacked in a creek bed while in transit to his home in the wee hours one morning, Luis Alberto has the presence of mind to recall that evil spirits are to be repelled with a blow from the left, not the right, fist, and once that wisdom enters his mind, he is able to fend off the evil spirit and make his way home. As I have dealt elsewhere with Luis Alberto's tale (see McDowell 2010), I will convey, in brief detail, his wife Maruja's tale of the evil spirit that attacks her neighbor through his beautiful black dog. Maruja is a leader among the women in her extended family. She is known for the fine gardens she cultivates and for the maize beer she prepares for the Inti Raymi celebrations in June. She also possesses the ability to cure people who suffer from spiritual afflictions. Smart and capable, it seems that no task lies beyond her abilities.

Maruja's tale, told in Spanish, begins with her neighbor and compadre, Enrique, falling sick just as he is on his way to Quito early one morning. These neighbors have a strong and healthy black dog, but as Enrique sets off before dawn for Quito to purchase wool for weaving, the dog begins howling and dashing around in circles, and Enrique stumbles back to the house, deathly ill. Enrique's wife comes to Maruja in a panic, alerting her that her husband is sick, vomiting, his skin is cold, and he is barely breathing. Luis Alberto is traveling, but Maruja agrees to help and immediately draws on her store of traditional knowledge to assess the situation.

Y allí le digo: "¿Sabes qué?
And then I tell her: "You know what?

Yo le llego.
I will come to him.

Dele aguita caliente,
Give him a little hot water,

un arco le hizo mal el estómago."
a rainbow has damaged his stomach."

Maruja here makes reference to the Runa belief that the rainbow can work harm on a person, if there is a coincidence between the colors in the rainbow and some item of clothing a person is wearing. She then gathers some curing materials—cigarettes, hen's eggs, and a coin—and goes to the aid of her neighbor and compadre, Enrique. She learns that he spoke of a *sombra,* a *mal espiritú,* that attacked the black dog in front of the house and then struck him and sent him back to his front door, barely able to move. *"Un mal espiritú,"* he had said, *"me cruzó,"* "a bad spirit crossed my path."

Maruja continues:

Yo vengo,
I come,

cojo huevos, chicos, esos que hay aquí,
I grab eggs, little ones, those we have around here,

ya y yo así parece, increible, yo
then, and I, it appears, incredible, I

yo digo, rezando, "Diosito mío
I say, praying, "Dear God of mine,

y quita de ese malino
take away this evil,

quítale todo eso."
take all of this away from him."

Maruja knows the prayers to recite in these circumstances, and she calls on God and Taita Imbabura to release this man from his suffering. She also knows to rub his body with hen's eggs, and then with a coin, so that the evil influence will depart Enrique's body and soul.

But at this juncture events take a turn for the worse—the evil is too strong, it bursts the eggs, and when Maruja rubs the sick man's body with a coin, the healer herself is attacked. Suddenly, she finds that she cannot raise her own arms, and she is on the verge of vomiting. At this tense moment, she utters her fear:

"¿O sea que me gana el diablo pues,
"Could it be that the devil is getting the better of me,

me gana a mi mismo?"
that he is beating me here?"

Like her husband Luis Alberto at the bottom of the creek bed, Maruja has now entered her darkest moment:

Ya la cara pálida
Now with my face pale

no sé cómo me siento,
I can't say how I feel,

me seguía poco a poco.
it came at me little by little.

Yo digo, "Dios que está allá," digo, "ya me cuida."
And I say, "God who is up there," I say, "cares for me now."

At this point Maruja does something that is, by community standards, quite unusual and truly heroic, and indeed, worthy of the myth protagonists—she takes two eggs and begins to rub her own body!

Yo misma, yo también me voy, agarro, cojo dos huevos.
I myself, I also go and grab them, I grab two eggs.

Yo, a mi hija, no más, ya estaba corriendo a colegio,
I, to my daughter, just like that, she was running off to her high school,

yo digo: "Pásame dos huevos."
I say: "Hand me two eggs."

The struggle with the spirit of the *sombra,* the *mal espiritú,* is fierce; the evil has passed into Maruja as she cured her neighbor, Enrique, and it has hit her with even more force. She is seated in the bathroom of her house, she nearly succumbs, but at last through valiant effort, she vanquishes this spirit. Both Maruja and Enrique recover, but the black dog perishes at the end.

In these dramatic tales of life-and-death encounters with *sombras,* Luis Alberto and Maruja muster the spiritual strength to resist the onslaught of sinister spirits. They draw on knowledge that lies at the core of their community's intellectual heritage, and they call on the Christian God and on the beneficent spirit of Taita Imbabura to come to their aid. The cosmic moment of these anecdotes is modern, not ancient, and derivative, not formative. But the forces that shaped the land and charted human society in ancient times are still active, and now, as then, those on the good side of cosmic history must gather useful knowledge and act appropriately, if civilization is to be saved. The larger lesson, for the Runa and the Sibundoy alike, is that by following in the footsteps of the ancestors, by applying the

knowledge they left behind, the modern people can conserve the precarious perch that was established for them in ancestral times.

Conclusion

I argue that myth, though inherently a public discourse, is prone to customization through processes of identification that connect storytellers to story protagonists. In one mode of personalization, vicarious identification, storytellers perform narratives that highlight their own positive attributes as mirrored in tale protagonists; we see this most clearly in the texts from Mariano Chicunque and María Juajibioy. In some cases, as we see with Francisco's *"Shulupsimanda Parlo,"* this vicarious connection can skew the perspective of the narrative. A different mode of identification, I propose, virtual identification, occurs when storytellers inject themselves into narratives pervaded with mythic consciousness. Luis Alberto Yamberla and Maruja Picuasi perform myth-like narratives with this feature, narratives that portray them in mortal combat with evil spirits operating in the modern world.

Recognizing these spaces for the personalization of myth helps resolve the clash of paradigms alluded to at this essay's outset. We can affirm from this vantage point that myth does indeed evince a collective persona, as many mythographers have detected over the years. At the same time, we find that those who tell the tales that compose a mythology find ways to make their personal imprint on the stories, and indeed, at times to insert themselves into comparable stories. Returning to the wisdom of Kenneth Burke (1973:296), we can avow that verbal art performances, whether spoken or written, are "proverbs writ large," that is to say, expressive forms shaped to label a situation from a specific angle of vision. The speaker's investment in what is spoken cannot be neglected if we are to obtain a secure purchase on even this most public of performance genres, the telling of mythic narratives.

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